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Armenians

Armenians are among the ancient people of Anatolia. The majority of Armenians in Turkey today belong to the Orthodox Church, while there are also a few Catholic and Protestant Armenians. Their number was around 2 million during the Ottoman Empire. Today, slightly more than 60,000 remain. Of these, around 60,000 are Orthodox, 50,000 of whom live in Istanbul, around 2,000 are Catholic and a small number are Protestant. Officially, the government recognizes Armenians as minorities but as used in Turkey, this term denotes second-class status.

Catholic Armenians have an archbishop in Istanbul and their spiritual leader is the Roman Catholic Church in Rome. The Orthodox community has its own Patriarchate in Istanbul. Armenians run private schools providing primary and secondary education in their mother tongue.

Many Armenians were killed in Ottoman pogroms against the Armenians in 1894–5 and the genocide of 1915. The Christian communities in Turkey have their rights guaranteed by international law under Articles 38-44 of the Lausanne Treaty of 1923, and, unlike Muslim minorities, have been officially recognized as minorities. But although the state respects their minority status, they are regarded as foreigners by most Turks even though they have inhabited the land of modern Turkey for well over 2,000 years, substantially longer than the Turks.

Under the system codified in 1961, the Armenian patriarch was to be chosen by an electoral college of Armenians in Turkey. However, this was changed by the Ozal government in the 1980s, only allowing officially recognized Armenian foundations to take part and restricting candidates by stipulating that the fathers of candidates be Turkish nationals.

In the 1990s there was a rise in tension over public perception that the Armenians were allegedly in alliance with radical Kurds in trying to dismember Turkey, and in 1995 an Armenian church was bombed. Another factor was the continuing hostility between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the disputed territory of Nagorno-Karabakh. Turkish official and public opinion strongly supports the Azeris who they see as a fellow Turkic people.

Armenians find it hard to register their children as Armenian. However, the community successfully operates its own schools, old peoples homes and its own press, although at times there has been pressure by the authorities to restrict Armenian language use in schools. In the east, ancient Armenian churches are allowed to fall into ruin, regardless of their spiritual and architectural significance, and the Armenian origin of Seljuk architecture remains unacknowledged.

Armenians have reported that Armenian schools, businessmen and religious institutions have been receiving threats by email, letter and phone. They have asked local police stations to investigate these threats and provide protection. The Patriarch has also sent a letter to the Governor of Istanbul asking for protection for Armenian institutions and businessmen. The response was that the governorship would not be able to afford the cost and they should pay for security from private companies themselves.

In January 2007 Armenian rights campaigner and writer Hrant Dink was shot dead in broad daylight on the steps of his own office. The murder offered a stark reminder of Turkey's ongoing failure to protect the rights of individuals who come from minority communities. Dink had been convicted and sentenced to six months imprisonment in 2005 under Article 301 of the Turkish penal code for 'denigrating Turkish identity.' This provision often has been used to suppress any discussion or acknowledgement of the 1915 Armenian genocide. Dink's offence was writing about Turkish-Armenian relations. Dink's assassin, a 17-year-old with 18 alleged accomplices, told police that Dink 'had insulted Turkishness.' At a hearing in October, the gunman's family accused authorities of collusion in the killing; one co-defendant was a police informant who had notified the authorities of the plot, and Turkish media broadcast a recorded phone call providing further indication that police knew of the plan in advance. In response to the Dink murder, nearly 200,000 protesters took to the streets of Istanbul carrying signs reading: 'We are all Hrant Dink. We are all Armenians.'

Alongside Dink, scores of journalists, authors, editors, publishers and intellectuals in Turkey expressing dissenting views on the Kurdish or the Armenian question are currently being tried under Article 301 (see below).

In 2009, Armenia and Turkey signed a historic agreement to resume normal diplomatic relations. But by 2010 the agreement had faltered when both the US and Sweden passed resolutions recognising the Turkish Ottoman mass killings of Armenians as 'genocide'. Amid resulting tensions the Turkish Prime Minister, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, told the BBC that of the 170,000 Armenians living in Turkey, 'only 70,000 were Turkish citizens'. He threatened to deport the remaining 100,000 Armenian migrants' if it becomes necessary'.

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